



Committee Bill 5434: An Act Concerning Processing of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Applications

Human Services Committee
March 1, 2011

Good day Senator Musto, Representative Tercyak and members of the Human Services Committee. My name is Lucy Nolan and I am the executive director of End Hunger Connecticut, a statewide anti-hunger and food security organization. I am here today to testify on Committee Bill 5434: An Act Concerning Processing of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Applications. Our primary mission is to create long term sustainable solutions to hunger and as such do significant outreach on SNAP, formally known as food stamps.

There is no question that the Department of Social Services is in trouble. People are not getting their benefits in a timely manner, their calls are going unanswered and their paperwork is getting lost. This is an infrastructure problem. We learned last week that the phone lines are antiquated, that over 3.7 million pieces of paper fly through the offices per month (and as our experience indicates often gets lost), appointments are missed by potential SNAP recipients, appointments they didn't know they had because the notice got to their houses long after the appointed time. We also learned that Connecticut's workers have a caseload of 1,740 cases per month, an unprecedented amount of cases for anyone to keep track of – a 68% increase since 2008, while the national average has decreased 3.69% as modernization in implemented.

Community partners are getting people to DSS for SNAP. For example, last December End Hunger Connecticut! partnered with AARP-CT to reach out to older adults. We were hugely successful. Volunteers from Foodshare prescreened the calls that came into the EHC! office and outreach workers from EHC!, Hispanic Health Council and CAHS helped those who wanted personal help, and for others we walked them through the application process. We helped over 450 households apply for SNAP in a six week period. Early reports indicate that we were successful in getting many who didn't know they were eligible on the program.

Connecticut has seen one of the largest increases in SNAP participation in the country (58% increase since 2008), but we have the lowest numbers in the nation for timeliness, negative error rates (cases that are wrongly denied or terminated), and while our payment rate is currently on the uptick, it was second worse in the nation in 2008. We are able to get applications to DSS to apply for the program; the breakdown or disconnect occurs at DSS once the applications get there. Taking current DSS workers out of the office and placing them in the community will not ease these problems but likely create more chaos as needed workers are absent.

It's clear that there are ways to build on the systems to assure a more effective intake. There is no question that putting workers out into the community, particularly those in which there is no DSS office close by, will help people get on the program. Limiting the outreach to SNAP only will negatively affect the other programs that people may be eligible for yet unable to access at these community sites. SNAP

and SNAP Education and Training *only* enrollment or outreach only may be counter to what we are trying to accomplish.

Section 1 (a) of the bill is already being done. DSS works with community action agencies and Connecticut Association of Human Services, Manchester Area Conference of Churches and Foodshare to enroll people in SNAP. **I would urge the committee to add in line 6 of this section the words community-based organizations behind community action agencies so there won't be confusion.** Our work with the e-Fax project is a perfect example of DSS working with us to enroll people in SNAP.

Section (b).

11 (b) The Commissioner of Social Services shall conduct community
12 outreach to assist persons applying for benefits [under the
13 supplemental nutrition assistance program] by directing [existing]
14 employees of the Department of Social Services to provide such
15 assistance at [community action agencies, hospitals and community
16 health centers] community-based organizations.

In line 12, I request that you take out the language that is specific only to SNAP as there are many programs that need outreach help and DSS workers will not be able, according to the present language to assist those in need with those programs. Last year, with the infusion of SNAP ARRA funds, we saw that intake in other programs such as TANF and Medicaid were negatively affected by the SNAP only focus.

Line 13 takes out [existing] employees to allow some flexibility with the Department of Social Services.

Line 15 removes specific organizations and places to a more generic community-based organization that includes those in **line 15 and 16** giving the agency and organizations more flexibility. Currently, End Hunger Connecticut!, the Hispanic Health Center, the Connecticut Association of Human Services, the Manchester Area Conference of Churches and Foodshare all do outreach that would benefit but are not included in this language. For example, End Hunger Connecticut! assists many community groups with their SNAP outreach, including helping the Community Action Agencies with their benefit online screener, and we need to assure that the department's limited resources can be used to the fullest extent.

I understand that this legislation is to help the state get more SNAP funds here, which has the two-fold approach of not only feeding the hungry but also creates additional economic activity in the state as every \$5.00 in SNAP benefits generates \$9.20 in total community spending. Concentrating on SNAP only will help people get food on the table earlier but it will impede others from getting on the programs that they may need, programs like Husky, Medicaid, nursing home assistance, Care for Kids and others. There are other ways in increase SNAP participation in the state that many of us are working on

End Hunger Connecticut! partners with the DSS Medicare Bus to do outreach. Our role there is to assist potential SNAP recipients on the spot with their applications. We make sure that everything is correct and the client has all of his or her paperwork ready so everything moves smoothly with the eligibility worker on the bus. We are one part of the myriad of programs available but SNAP is the most confusing of them all. I am told that on a fantastic day they will see 20 people. This is community outreach, and it

is not SNAP specific outreach but reaches all the programs. We are able to connect with the community to ensure that those who are eligible, or curious, are there – and each one of them is prepared before the interview.

End Hunger Connecticut! was awarded a grant from the USDA to expand our e-Fax program around the state. We are working with DSS to target the regions to move forward with and we will be moving forward in Norwich and New Haven (the pilot is in Hartford). This seemingly simple idea is working well. We are able to take the SNAP applications that we assisted clients with and send them, with all the necessary supporting information such as proof of identity, income verifications, and other related information) is faxed by us and which is created to an online document at DSS's end which is paperless. The document goes to a specific point person at the agency for eligibility. There is a record of application, and the e-Fax Corporation retains a secure copy of all documents for 3 years. Before the e-Fax out of 85 randomly chosen applications 37 were granted and 47 were denied. After e-Fax, 61 cases were granted and only 24 were denied.

The USDA made it clear that the biggest issue with the Department of Social Services eligibility problems lie with the current technology. The Governor has recommended funding for DSS to begin the modernization effort to support the streamlining and upgrading of the Medicaid eligibility systems. While the upgrade is a long way away it is the first time in many years that there is such a commitment at the highest level of government and therefore it is important not to hamstring DSS when it comes to determining methods to increase their efficacy.

The best way to increase the numbers for SNAP at DSS is through modernization: creating call centers, interactive voice response, online access, and changing staff roles to accommodate the increasing numbers of people currently in need of services. Working with community groups in the field who assist clients prepare for intake will help as well. End Hunger Connecticut! will continue to prepare clients and follow through on their progress.

Finally, DSS should take advantage of any USDA waivers and options that helps the program operate more smoothly. Policy changes such as the standard medical deduction and standard self-employment income deduction would allow the caseworker to spend less time on timely verifications and move faster on the eligibility. As we've seen with the e-Fax preparedness and having all the information available increases accurate application eligibility.

Every day people come into our office seeking help, at times they've been sent to us by DSS workers. We are doing community outreach and getting people to DSS fully prepared and ready for immediate intake. We follow up with them to make sure the process is moving as quickly and efficiently as possible, and when there is a problem we are able to work it out with DSS. We can get people to DSS, but the problems with SNAP is internal not external. Forcing workers out of the office, without the proper infrastructure will continue the same problems we are trying to stem here. While working together we can increase the reach of the SNAP.

Thank you.